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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: ERBIL AND KIRKUK: MURDER AND INTIMIDATION  
THREATEN THE SURVIVAL OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN NORTHERN IRAQ

Classified By: Classified By: RRT Erbil Regional Coordinator Lucy Tamlyn for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

This is a joint RRT Erbil -- PRT Kirkuk Reporting Cable.

11. (C) Summary: Credible death threats from the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Iranian intelligence service may force one of the Kurdistan Region's boldest independent media outlets, Lvin magazine, to move its operations to Europe, according to Lvin's Editor-in-Chief Ahmad Mira. Mira said the KDP and the Iranians have been enraged by recent Lvin reporting on corruption and Iranian intelligence operations in the Kurdistan Region. Lvin's Erbil Bureau Chief, Halgurt Samad, separately alleged that KDP Intelligence ("Parastin") Chief Masrour Barzani personally green-lighted the late-July killing in Kirkuk of Lvin reporter Soran Hama, who had written a detailed expose about KDP security force involvement in a Kirkuk prostitution ring. Citing unidentified "senior KDP officials" from the camp of Masrour's cousin, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, as well as unidentified sources in the Kirkuk police, Samad told us that Parastin officers based in Mosul were used to kill Hama. Lvin is not alone in its troubles. Editors at other independent media outlets complain that the KDP is attempting to strangle them financially and putting intense pressure on KRG Vice President/senior PUK official Kosrat Rasul Ali to close down the Sulaimaniyah-based Lvin, in particular. The Kurdistan Journalists' Association has requested more support from the USG in order to assist independent journalism from becoming permanently silenced in Kurdistan. End summary.

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Death Threats from the KDP... and Now Iran  
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12. (C) The Editor-in-Chief of Lvin magazine, Ahmad Mira, told RRT public diplomacy officers that "nearly hourly" death threats against him and his staff may force him to close the publication and move overseas, probably to Germany or Norway. Lvin is one of the Kurdistan Region's few independent media outlets and is read closely by the region's political elites, who reportedly have been enraged by the magazine's bold reporting on corruption and other "sensitive" topics. What has tipped the scales toward closing Lvin, Mira explained, is that the death threats are now not only coming from the KDP but from Iran as well. Mira said he was warned by the Iranian intelligence service ("Ittilaa't") that he and his Erbil Bureau Chief, Halgurt Samad, would be killed if they didn't stop reporting on Iranian intelligence activities in the Kurdistan Region. Mira, still traumatized by the July 22 murder in Kirkuk of Lvin journalist Soran Hama, lamented that "Lvin may be the first" of the independent media outlets "to fall."

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Masrour Barzani Implicated  
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13. (C) In a separate conversation with RRT PD officers, Halgurt Samad alleged that KDP Intelligence ("Parastin")

Chief Masroor Barzani personally green-lighted the killing of Soran Hama, who had written a detailed expose about KDP security force involvement in a Kirkuk prostitution ring. Citing unidentified "senior KDP officials" from the camp of Masroor's cousin and putative rival, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, as well as unidentified sources in the Kirkuk police, Samad told us that Parastin officers based in Mosul were used to kill Hama. Samad, again citing "senior KDP officials," claimed that witnesses have told Kirkuk police investigators that the car used by Hama's killers was spotted at the residence of the KDP's chief representative in Kirkuk. Any doubts about who was behind Hama's killing were put to rest, Samad said, by Kurdistan National Assembly member Naz Naz Mohammed, whose husband and father are both KDP Politburo members. Following Hama's killing, Samad said that the KNA member matter-of-factly told him that "Mira didn't respond when we tried to buy off Lvin and didn't respond when Masroor warned him. What did you expect Masroor to do?"

14. (C) In addition to Soran, the Editor-in-Chief and Senior Editor for Lvin in Sulemaniyah told PRT Kirkuk that they have been repeatedly called and threatened with death since the beginning of the year. They claim that although the police have been given cellphone numbers from which the threats have been made and descriptions of vehicles, nothing has been done. Although the cellphone companies have the names registered to the phones from which the calls were made, the police refuse to take action. In Soran's case, the police were aware of the threats well before the murder, with Soran even going on television to publicize the threats. Yet they did nothing to help him and now that he is dead and his

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colleagues expect no serious investigation will ever take place in Soran's murder without pressure from the USG.

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Other Independent Media Feeling the Heat, Too  
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15. (C) Lvin isn't alone in its troubles. In conversations with RRT PD officers, the editors-in-chief of Hawlati, Rozhnama, and Radio Nawa all said that the KDP is attempting to snuff out the independent media outlets in the Kurdistan Region. Hawlati's Abid Arif and Rozhnama's Adnan Osman told us that the KDP is trying to financially strangle their outlets by, for example, forbidding government organizations from purchasing their newspapers and by threatening businesses that advertise in Hawlati or Rozhnama. In addition, Arif, Osman, and Lvin's Ahmad Mira all asserted that the KDP Politburo has authorized two million dollars to be spent on shutting their publications down; this sum, they claimed, includes payoffs to Parastin officers who kill independent journalists. Unidentified "senior PUK sources" have also allegedly told the three editors that the KDP is putting intense pressure on KRG Vice President (and PUK Deputy Secretary General) Kosrat Rasul Ali to close down Lvin, in particular. The KDP, our interlocutors explained, has argued that allowing Lvin to publish in Sulaimaniyah violates the 2007 KDP-PUK Strategic Cooperation Agreement, which calls for the two parties to present a "unified media voice."

16. (C) Aaraf Qurbani, Editor-in-Chief of Asso Newspaper in Sulemaniyah, told PRT Kirkuk that his reporters have received the same threats as the others. His opinion, with which the Lvin editors agreed, is that Soran was not killed because of a single article exposing prostitution. He asserts unequivocally that this murder was the best way to send a message to Lvin and other independent journalists that they must restrain themselves or face the consequences, while simultaneously showing that the KRG will be more involved in Kirkuki matters. The reason they believe Soran, who was in Lvin's Kirkuk Bureau, was murdered was because he does not work in Sulemaniyah (where a murder might embarrass the PUK)

or Erbil (where it might embarrass the KDP) but in Kirkuk, where theoretically the KRG is not responsible for security. He added that an unsolved murder in Kirkuk also strengthens the murderers' case that the city needs more "protection" from the KRG.

¶7. (C) Kirkuk was also the place where Dr. Abdulsattar Tahir Shareef, a longtime Kurdish politician, was assassinated in early March after publishing his memoirs and giving Lvin an interview harshly critical of past and present Kurdish leaders. Shortly after the murder, Lvin journalists told RRT Erbil that Adham Barzani, a cousin of Massoud Barzani and a former member of the Kurdistan National Assembly, had threatened to kill both Dr. Abdulsattar and Lvin journalist Ibrahim Ali over the characterization of historical Kurdish leader, Sheikh Ahmed Barzani. (Lvin subsequently published a disclaimer that Dr. Abdulsattar's views did not represent those of the magazine.) After Abdulsattar's death, KDP Politburo Member Muhammad Mala Qadir told Hawlati newspaper that Abdulsattar had made many enemies by publishing interviews and memoirs. Dr. Abdulsattar's nephew, Sherko Salayee, told Hawlati that he suspected that Dr. Abdulsattar was killed because of his writings -- especially the interview with "Lvin." Salayee observed that the neighborhood where Dr. Abdulsattar was killed generally is considered a safe neighborhood. Both Soran Hama and Dr. Abdulsattar were killed in neighborhoods of Kirkuk considered to be controlled by the Kurds.

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Journalists Push Back, But Want Help  
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¶8. (SBU) The journalists have tried to respond as best they can through public statements and letters. The Kirkuk Journalists' Association published an open letter they sent to President Bush calling the KRG "the new Baath party." They detailed how the KRG uses its informational sources to find dissenters, arrest and detain them by any means necessary (sometimes falsifying charges of drug-dealing or petty crime) or worse, eliminate them, as was the case with Soran Mama Hama.

¶9. (SBU) Shwan Dawdi, Chief of Al Hawal News Agency, told PRT Kirkuk that the journalists have done everything they can with their own resources, but they cannot stand up to the political parties on their own. Latif Faraj, General Secretary of the Kirkuk Branch of The Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate (KJS) presented PRT Kirkuk with evidence they have that over 60 journalists have been threatened, assaulted, or

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killed in Kurdistan and Kirkuk in 2008 alone. Just in the week following Soran's death, at least three journalists (from Lvin, Awene, and Rudaw) all received death threats by phone. The KJS has meticulously compiled data on all of the threats as well as the cases which have gone all the way to trial and not been resolved because the courts still use old Baathist laws in their rulings. While they have shared this information with the PRT and with the Committee to Protect Journalists (which sent a letter of condemnation to President Barzani), the KJS maintains that the KRG has shown no intention to halt their program of intimidation and will not stop threatening or murdering journalists until they receive unequivocal US and international pressure.

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Comment: Need for USG Engagement  
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¶10. (C) The accumulated evidence paints a sobering picture of threats, intimidation and direct hostile action against the independent media in the KRG. Losing Lvin would be a huge blow to media freedom here. While Masroor Barzani is probably not directing KDP effort to squeeze the independent media, he may be approving them. In trips to northern Iraq

over the last couple months, Senior Advisor for Northern Iraq Tom Krajewski has met with journalists and NGO representatives in Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah, and Erbil and warned senior KRG officials including Masrour Barzani and his father, President Massoud Barzani, of deep USG concern over harassment, intimidation, and murder of journalists. We will look for opportunities to reinforce that high level message. We will continue our efforts to strengthen the Sulay-based independent media outlets, by seeking training for more of their reporters and continuing to raise the issue of press freedom with senior KRG interlocutors. Embassy, RRT Erbil, and PRT Kirkuk believe that more attention, stronger USG statements of condemnation, and having representatives of the USG attend journalists' trials would strengthen the position of independent journalism vis--vis the KRG.

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